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STATE OF CONNECTICUT

OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD



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Testimony of Beth Bye, Commissioner Office of Early Childhood Before the Education Committee

H.B. 6686 – An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Office of Early Childhood

H.B. 6662 – An Act Concerning the Governor’s Recommendations Concerning Education

February 22, 2023

Greetings, Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and distinguished members of the Education Committee. I am Beth Bye, Commissioner of the Office of Early Childhood (OEC). I am here today to testify in support of the agency’s bill, H.B. 6686 - An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Office of Early Childhood.

Our agency bill addresses several sections of the School Readiness statutes. It would expand the definition of School Readiness to include infants and toddlers age birth to three years of age (Sec. 1). This change in eligibility would move toward greater alignment and integration of OEC’s state-funded early care and education programs (i.e., School Readiness and Child Day Care (CDC)). Expanding the definition of School Readiness to include infants and toddlers increases communities’ capacity to address the acute shortage of infant and toddler spaces, take advantage of recent state and federal funds targeted at infant and toddler care, and help communities better meet families’ needs through School Readiness Council planning.

The bill would streamline the Qualified Staff Member (QSM) requirements to reduce the complexity of the requirements, offer existing non-ECE degree holders a pathway to QSM compliance, and set benchmarks for staff working toward bachelor’s degrees (Sec. 1).

We recommend changing the School Readiness Grant awards from annually to every two years to align with the biennial budget and Child Day Care contracts (Sec. 1). Changing grant awards from annual to biennial will also relieve undue burden on programs and districts to complete applications on an annual basis.

The bill proposes eliminating the requirement that any School Readiness or Child Day Care rate increase must be used exclusively for staff compensation (Sec. 1 & 4). Increasing wage compensation is critically needed for child care programs to recruit and retain staff. However, child care program budgets are complex and must cover the cost of other needs such as rent, utilities, classroom and playground equipment, instructional materials, and staff professional

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development. This language is not meaningful, in that programs already spend 65-95% of their funds on staffing. This is overly bureaucratic and adds to the administrative burden for programs and for OEC.

The bill proposes changing language regarding kindergarten readiness so that there are no specific criteria defining when a child would be considered ready or not ready for kindergarten. A written authorization, signed by the parent or guardian of a child, would be needed to indicate that the child will not attend kindergarten until the following year and filed with the local or regional school district (Sec. 2).

The bill deletes the sunset date for the Smart Start program (Sec. 5). This bill section also removes the option to prioritize Smart Start enrollment based on free and reduced lunch status. This will result in more consistent data related to income for enrolled students and will align with other state funded preschool programs. Reporting based solely on income status will be phased in for existing Smart Start programs.

The bill removes a specific income eligibility threshold for recipients who qualify based on their loss of eligibility for TANF (Sec. 6). We propose removing this language as there is now a federally required second-tier for eligibility, known as graduated phase-out, which OEC has set to 65% of the State Median Income. Current statutory language must be amended to comply with federal law.

We propose establishing the OEC Parent Cabinet in statute (Sec. 7). The OEC Parent Cabinet was co-created with a group of parent leaders and the first-ever Cabinet were seated in September 2021. The role of the Parent Cabinet is to serve as a vehicle to elevate family voice and build connections among Connecticut families, communities, and the OEC. Through leadership opportunities, the Parent Cabinet raises up and incorporates the expertise of parents with young children throughout the OEC to strengthen family-centered policies and programs. The Cabinet also has representation on the Early Childhood Cabinet and links with Two Gen Council and Parent Ambassadors in 50 communities. The Cabinet is important advisory infrastructure to assure that the state systems are responsive to family needs.

We propose changing the name from “early childhood councils” to “local early childhood collaboratives” (LECCs) (Sec. 8). The local early childhood collaboratives are an important component of the early childhood system by creating the link between local and state and promoting community and parent voice to inform our agency about priorities and needs.

The bill would permit the OEC to share unredacted information and records with law enforcement regarding an office investigation of licensed child care centers, group child care homes, family child care homes, and youth camps (Sec. 9, 10, & 11). This language would align

with the Department of Children and Families' authority to share information with law enforcement, pursuant to CGS 17a-28.

The bill would permit the OEC to order a child care operator or person who has who has an ownership interest or serves as an officer, corporate director, managing member or managing partner of the operator, and participates in the management or control of such operator's provision of child care services, to submit to a medical examination as part of an office investigation concerning the health, safety, and welfare of the children cared for in the child care program. This legislative proposal would align with the Department of Health's authority to order such examinations as part of an investigation into the inability of a health care professional to practice with reasonable skill or safety, as set forth in CGS 19a-12e. (Sec. 9).

Finally, Sec. 12 would repeal Sec. 500-520b, which addresses the early childhood teacher certification (ECTC). This would no longer be necessary under the proposed changes to the qualified staff member language found in Sec. 1.

The OEC also supports Section 10 and 11 of **H.B. 6662 – An Act Implementing the Governor's Recommendations Concerning Education**. Section 10 increases the School Readiness full-time preschool rate to \$10,500 beginning in FY 25. This rate increase is reflected in the Governor's budget adjustment for School Readiness and the Child Day Care program budgeted in the Early Care and Education Account. This rate increase will provide ongoing support for child care programs, allow for programs to pay staff higher wages, and give parents better buying power, choice, and access to higher-quality programs.

Section 11 creates a protective services category for the Care 4 Kids program for adoptive and foster families, and families experiencing homelessness. Instituting such a class, which is allowable by 45 CFR 98.20 (a)(3)(ii), waives the eligibility requirements for the individual groups identified and makes them categorically eligible for Care 4 Kids. Instituting this protective service category will allow children, such as foster children, adopted children and children experiencing homelessness to have continuity of care. We are working with DCF on this effort and have that agency's full support.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to answer your questions now and/or at a later date. The OEC is committed to work together—with legislators, the executive branch, providers, advocates and parents—to better serve our families with young children.